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REVIEW ARTICLES

ASPECTS OF POLITBURO BEHAVIOR

By NATHAN LEITES

James Burnham, *The Coming Defeat of Communism*, New York, John Day, 1950, 278 pp., \$3.50.

MR. BURNHAM'S view of the means and ends of the Politburo is much more insightful than many other interpretations that have been given. His major theses are (1) that the United States has very great freedom of action during the next few years because the Soviet leadership is unwilling to accept war and almost certain defeat at this time, and (2) that great opportunities exist at present for weakening the Soviet system by subversion and thus avoiding at a future date otherwise almost certain war. It is not these theses or the book as a whole which I propose to discuss but rather a number of points concerning Politburo behavior which he makes and with which I am not in agreement. These points of disagreement I believe to be both intellectually and politically important.

1. Mr. Burnham says that "Communism uses ideas and ideals as it uses drugs and guns and airplanes, as instruments" for the attainment of world power. While this is true, there is no reason to assume that the Politburo has entirely lost what one might call its religious belief in the eventual transformation of the destiny of man on earth. Stalinism has radically deepened the Leninist belief that the traditional values of socialism will be profoundly violated before they are ultimately realized. Also, it is likely that to some degree (somewhat in the way that the Grand Inquisitor, in Dostoyevsky's parable, abandoned belief in certain teachings of Christ) the Stalinist Politburo no longer believes it possible to realize some of the anarchist aspects of Lenin's utopia, as he described them in 1917 in *State and Revolution*. But we have little reason to assume that "cynicism" has replaced moral conviction—though,

as is apt to happen within an established elite getting on in age, the need for a moral justification of day-to-day actions may be less frequently emphasized.

2. Throughout his book Mr. Burnham presents the Politburo as having an entirely offensive orientation toward the outside world. However, one could argue that the Politburo fears an attack aiming at its annihilation as much as it strives for the world-wide expansion of its power. Under the peculiar code of policy by which it operates, any action is apt to have both a defensive and an offensive orientation: conditions designed to prevent annihilation and those making for victory are considered to be largely the same.

3. Mr. Burnham states that the weight of the continuous communist offensive "is sustained by the political phase of the movement, not by the military." Again, one might argue that the opposite has been increasingly true. Events and statements drawn from the last three decades give evidence of this.

a) After the Red Army had repelled the Polish thrust into the Soviet Union in the summer of 1920, the Politburo had to decide whether to undertake an offensive into Poland for the dual purpose of seizing power there and of stimulating revolution in Germany, which was accessible to the Red Army. A minority of Moscow policy-makers warned that this course would fail because it would reinforce anti-Soviet attitudes in Poland. They advised that Moscow should rely on the "revolutionary situation" which Pilsudsky's defeat would create in an uninvaded Poland. However, the military course was chosen.

b) In January 1925, at a plenum of the Central Committee, Stalin said:

I assume that the forces of the revolutionary movement in the West may one day [sic] lead to the defeat of the bourgeoisie somewhere [sic]. That is so. But it will be very difficult for them to keep in power. This is clearly shown by the examples of the border regions, for example, Esthonia and Latvia. The question of our army, of its power, of its preparedness, will then necessarily rise among us as the most decisive question.¹

¹ *Collected Works*, Vol. VII, pp. 13-14.

c) The few reliable reporters of conversations among the Moscow top group during the 'twenties and 'thirties concur in attributing to Stalin and his entourage a low estimate of the role that the Comintern, by itself, might play in expanding the communist area. According to Walter Krivitsky, Stalin said in 1927: "Who are these Comintern people? They are nothing but hirelings on our Soviet payroll. In ninety years they will never make a revolution anywhere."

According to Lominadze, who was close to Stalin in the late twenties, Stalin said: "The Comintern represents nothing. It exists only because of our support."² Deutscher adds: "The writer heard the foremost . . . leaders of the Comintern in the early twenties . . . attributing to Stalin remarks in substance identical with those quoted by Lominadze . . ."³ He also says: "'One Soviet tractor is worth more than ten good foreign Communists' was a characteristic remark heard from highly placed Bolsheviks in the days of the first five-year plan. The phrase reflected . . . intimate talk . . . in Stalin's entourage."⁴

A point to be added here might be that the ineffectiveness of the German Communist Party, which was traditionally regarded as the second most important Communist Party in the world, in domestic politics and in weakening the German war effort against the Soviet Union, must have reinforced Politburo contempt for foreign Communist Parties. The fierce anti-German propaganda within the Soviet Union during the war was, of course, mainly related to the Politburo view of morale exigencies. But it probably also reflected intense disappointment with the German Party and proletariat.

d) Between 1917 and 1944 only one area outside of the Soviet Union was added to the Communist sector of the world, namely, whatever area in the interior of China had been held by the Communist Party of China since the late 'twenties. This unique success was due (as was the later conquest of China) to (1) the vastness, (2) the "backwardness," (3) the "semi-colonial" (rather than "colonial") status of China, and hence could not be repeated in most parts of the world.

² *Bulleten Opozitsii*, No. 33, quoted by I. Deutscher in *Stalin*, New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1949, p. 392.

³ Deutscher, *Stalin*, p. 392, n. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 405, n. 2.

(e) During 1944-45, the Communist sector of the world expanded into *all* those areas—but *only* those areas—which had been occupied for a time by the Soviet Army. It is likely that (except for China) the Politburo regards every inch of land that has been added to its domain since 1944 as territory where the Soviet Army had been, or still is, stationed, and that could not have been added had this not been so.

By 1948, it seems to have been an accepted point that for a seizure of power by the Party in any area, the prior entry of the Soviet army is apt to be a necessary condition. In a letter of May 4, 1948 the Soviet Central Committee stated, in answer to an earlier letter from the Yugoslav Central Committee:

Tito and Kardelj . . . speak of the merits and successes of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. . . . It is necessary to emphasize that the services of the French and Italian Communist Parties to the revolution were not less but greater than those of Yugoslavia. Even though the French and Italian . . . Parties have so far achieved less success than the CPY, this is . . . mainly because . . . the Soviet army . . . crushed the German invader, liberated Belgrade and in this way created the conditions which were necessary for the CPY to achieve power. Unfortunately the Soviet army did not and could not render such assistance to the French and Italian Communist Parties.

It may also be likely (the Varga episode is an indication of this) that if a major depression in the “capitalist” area does not come about, the Politburo will develop the point that the “latest phase of imperialism” includes certain economic stabilization devices. This will not change the fact that “history has put on the order of the day” the destruction of what remains of “world capitalism,” but will further increase the direct role of the Soviet Union in this process.

Needless to say, such changes will not be expressed in public “theory”. It is useful not to change dogmas, not to shock foreign Communists, and not to arouse apprehension in the Soviet population of a possibly aggressive policy of action. Nevertheless, in a way characteristic of Stalinist taciturnity, the newer beliefs might be expressed (within the Politburo) by, say, “concrete” assessment of the incapacity of the Communist Party of western Germany to seize power there without the direct “assistance” of the Soviet army.

4. Mr. Burnham inclines both to overestimate and underestimate the tendency of the Politburo to press for advances. On the one hand he says (without indicating the military context in which he makes this statement): "It is quite possible that the Red Army, far from mounting an offensive to the West in Europe, would, as its first major move, fall back to the East." What he says about the Politburo's appreciation of the value of "retreats" is true, but it is also true (as "X" pointed out in his article in *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947) that the Soviet operational code insists upon the necessity of advancing as far as possible in every situation. One of the aims of such an advance would be to create a glacis for retreat, if retreat should become necessary. It seems quite unlikely that the Soviet Army would refrain from occupying Western Europe, for no matter how temporary a period, if it could be done without prohibitive cost, since the wholesale destruction or removal of military-industrial installations and personnel could be effected in the time. In comparison with such a consideration, misgivings about the "grave logistical problem of maintaining large occupation and defensive forces in the West" would not be very strong—quite apart from the fact that the Soviet Army considers its "logistical problem" to be much less "grave" than that of the American Army. Also, it is hard to believe that in the foreseeable future the Politburo would regard their apparatuses in the satellite countries as too unreliable to be "astride their lines of communication" in the case of an advance to the West.

In their retrospective accounts of the Red Army offensive into Poland in 1920, Lenin and Stalin both indicated that the Army had bitten off more than it could chew. They had in mind a conventional military consideration. The temporary occupation of eastern Poland had not brought in a worthy amount of war booty, and the Red Army had been exposed to an effective counteroffensive. But, except when advance would result in such obviously self-defeating situations, it seems very probable (as "X" also pointed out in his article) that it is a rule of Politburo policy always to push ahead as far as possible, always being ready to retreat (as was the case in Azerbaijan in 1946, and in northern Greece).

On the other hand, Mr. Burnham exaggerates when he says that the estimates made by Western negotiators of Soviet intentions have been false: "The Kremlin, they have known, wants as much as it can possibly get—but not, they have thought, everything." Of course, ultimately the Kremlin "wants everything," but since it does not expect to get "everything" at once the estimates have not been altogether wrong. Mr. Burnham also regards as mistaken the assumption of Western negotiators that, "The Kremlin is at least agreed that peace, however hard to assure, is desirable." But this assumption has certainly always been correct. Similarly, it is an exaggeration to say that the West is mistaken in believing that while "the Kremlin strives for the most one-sided possible agreement in its favor," it "at least aims at some agreement, on some terms." It is true that the Politburo in certain situations wants no agreement whatever; but it is equally true (as Mr. Burnham himself says further on) that it finds agreement very convenient in other situations. The point of discovery would seem to be: What do agreements mean in Soviet diplomacy? Are they steps supposed to lead toward ever farther-reaching integrative processes with the West, or does the Soviet Union view an "agreement" merely as a strategic means of obviating retreat and fostering advance? As Mr. Burnham points out, we can be fairly certain that the latter is the case.

5. In criticizing the United States policy of containment, Mr. Burnham says: "A perpetual defensive is impossible in general, and it is particularly fantastic in relation to the struggle against world communism. The containment line is almost immeasurably vast . . . How could a front of that magnitude be held?" This would be true in the case of a shooting war. If one assumes, however, as Burnham does, that the Politburo does not want war (at least for the next two or three years), then a very extensive "front line" can indeed be held—provided that it is made quite clear that any advance beyond it would provoke war.

6. In fact, it is probable that even Soviet retreats could be induced by similar pressure. Mr. Burnham refers repeatedly and casually to the possibility of "perhaps" inducing the Politburo to evacuate certain border countries, such as Bulgaria or

eastern Germany, short of an acute threat of war, that is, short of an ultimatum demanding evacuation. The probability of this would be exceedingly slight as it appears to be a central rule of Politburo behavior to resist an enemy offensive at the very beginning unless it is supported by overwhelming force (applied locally or against the Center itself), in which case the Politburo would retreat to whatever extent was necessary to prevent a showdown that might endanger its very existence.

7. As to the domestic position of the Politburo, Mr. Burnham says: "The inference to be drawn from the mass slave-labor camps, the purges, internal passports, prohibition of foreign travel, and suppression of opposition opinion . . . is too clear to be denied any longer by any but fanatics or deliberate liars." But he seems to be overlooking a major rationale of Bolshevik violence, i.e., not to react in specific and limited ways to nonconformist behavior but to strike with overwhelming force where the beginnings, or even the possibilities of beginnings, of serious discontent are held to be present. Therefore the massive use of violence which Burnham speaks about cannot always be taken as an indicator of actual discontent and its scope. Furthermore, Burnham does not consider that violence and other measures of control when applied in this "totalitarian" fashion are apt to be effective in reducing awareness of discontent as well as overt nonconformist actions.

8. "Throughout the party [presumably the Soviet party] the MVD can observe what members display any slight sympathy for Tito, or fail to sound convincing in denunciation; and the names of these members can be entered in the appropriate files." Nobody in the party who is not suicidal is going "to display any slight sympathy for Tito" or "fail to sound convincing in denunciation"—and it is rather easy to sound convincing when denunciations have become as extreme and as stereotyped as they are in the Soviet Union today. In the case of individuals who do not conform to the appropriate standard, more radical means are adopted than entering their names "in the appropriate files."

Burnham continues: "To give a chance for this maneuver is perhaps part of the explanation for the comparative mildness of Stalin's counter-Tito measures during the first year

after the break." In view of the points just made, this seems implausible. The explanation of this Stalinist "mildness" may be, more conventionally, that the Politburo overestimated the subversive devices being used against Tito, and the effectiveness of its appeal to the Yugoslav Party against the Yugoslav leadership; also that the Politburo was apprehensive that a more general conflict might arise from military attack, covert or overt, against Tito.

9. "At the very beginning of communist state power, the communists confronted serious difficulties in both theory and practice over 'the national question.'" While there were, of course, "serious difficulties" in "practice," it is difficult to perceive such "difficulties" in "theory". What Burnham calls the "constitutional myth according to which the actually monolithic state was a free federation, freely dissolvable, of autonomous units" has always been generally accepted.

10. In discussing the history of Bolshevik theory, Mr. Burnham says: "The question . . . arose: What is to be the relation of the . . . foreign communists to the Soviet state? Combined theory and practice, though not without travail, produced an answer"—namely, that the Soviet Union is the "fatherland of all toilers." It is not clear what "travail" occurred in the elaboration of this formula, which is not, as Mr. Burnham seems to imply, the consequence of a complicated set of propositions. Rather, the whole "theory" referred to here consists solely of that formula. The same is true in other instances where Mr. Burnham speaks about Leninist-Stalinist "theory."

He also states the following contradiction in current Stalinist doctrine: "If . . . the Soviet Union and also the new nations are 'building toward communism' . . . why in the name of Dialectical Materialism is one to be preferred over the rest?" In theory, the Soviet Union is not so "preferred." There may be a difficulty here because of the contrast between theory and fact, but such contrasts have always been prominent in Stalinism. Their impact on communists may well be greater now than they have been at other times, but whether this is so cannot be ascertained from a mere inspection of the text of the theory.

Mr. Burnham elaborates this point by saying that the Politburo is in a theoretical quandary vis-à-vis the satellites:

The communists cannot openly say that the satellite nations are merely colonial dependencies . . . But to admit these nations to full equality would be to threaten the monolithic unity of the communist political structure . . . The communist theoreticians try to temporize with jerry-built theories, hoping that a revelation will soon be made manifest somehow.

Mr. Burnham seems to equate the "admission of these nations to full equality" in practice (which would indeed be inconvenient) and in words (which is so much easier). The theory of the "People's Democracy," whatever variations it has undergone since 1944, has always, at least by implication, admitted these nations to "full equality" with the Soviet Union, for example, by stressing their sovereignty. How impressive such official language is, and to whom, is another matter; but no "theoretical" difficulty seems to be involved.

Mr. Burnham further presents the following contradiction in current Stalinist doctrine concerning the satellite countries:

The satellites properly aid the Soviet Union now because they were liberated by the blood and exertions of the Red Army and the Soviet Union . . . But communist doctrine teaches that there is no gratitude in politics.

Communist doctrine does teach this with reference to the relations between the Party and the rest of the world, but not with reference to relationships between communists. Not that "gratitude" is required in internal relations, but it is not opposed.

11. Mr. Burnham discusses another contradiction in Stalinist doctrine:

. . . the theoreticians are beginning to declare that the Soviet Union . . . has now reached the stage of 'communism' . . . But communist doctrine teaches that under communism the state 'withers away', a process not yet very noticeable in the Soviet Union.

Stalinist doctrine is in fact full of unadmitted and unresolved contradictions, but the aspect touched upon here has always been one for which care has been taken to minimize contradictions. The "withering away of the state" has for a long time been predicted only for completed "communism"; and only its "early shoots" are supposed to be appearing in the

Soviet Union. Second, in an interview with Alexander Werth, Stalin added to his earlier theory of socialism in one country the theory of the possibility of communism in one country. It follows that the state would continue to exist even under complete communism, as long as a capitalist sector of the world is preserved.

12. As regards the situation that will be created by Stalin's death, Mr. Burnham says: "Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism has no satisfactory solution in theory" for "the mechanism of succession." He asks: "How, and upon what verbal grounds, will X replace Stalin?" The simplest "theoretical solution"—the one adopted when Stalin succeeded Lenin—might be as follows. For a certain period of time popular attention would be concentrated on the deceased Stalin, and on the "Central Committee" as retaining supreme authority after his death. From a certain moment on, not merely the "Central Committee" but the "Central Committee under the leadership of X," or "the Party under the leadership of X," would be presented as the supreme authority. There would not be, as there was not for Stalin, any explicit statement as to why X rather than Y had become the new "leader"; but there would be many statements implicitly justifying this position—his great accomplishments in the past, his correct prognoses in the past, etc.

13. Finally, the delay in convening a Nineteenth Party Congress in Moscow is related to the existence of a "moral crisis." Mr. Burnham says that the Politburo members who gave up their ministry in 1949 "are no doubt trying to prepare for the convening of a Party Congress," which, he says, it would be "most awkward if not impossible" to hold before an "ideologically acceptable answer" has been elaborated "which can be unanimously voted." This misses certain major points of the situation in the Party. First, Stalinism has eliminated the criteria by which the ideological "acceptability" of an answer can be measured: any answer that the Central Committee would put before the Party Congress would, by that very fact, be an "ideologically acceptable" answer. Second, there are no "problems" that demand "answers" which have not yet been given *on the theoretical level*. Third, to imply that if an "un-

acceptable" answer were proposed there might be a division of the vote at the Party Congress seems to be unrealistic.

While the points put forward in this paper are confirmable within degrees ranging from practical certainty to moderate plausibility, the relevant data are at present uncollected. Perhaps this will be remedied during the current decade.